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Behind the House Vote on 'the Secret War,' a Low-Profile Insider

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The most surprising foreign policy development of the just-recessed session of Congress—the House's vote last week against "the secret war" in Nicaragua—is a message to President Reagan from the Democratic centrists and the political system at large about the controversial aspects of his Central America policy.

The 228-to-195 vote to cut off undercover CIA aid is also a vivid reminder of the personal and institutional factors that contribute to Washington decision-making, especially on Capitol Hill.

The man behind the vote, in this case, was Rep. Edward P. Boland (D-Mass.), a veteran member of the inner circle of the House, a moderate-to-conservative on most national security issues and, of central importance to this controversy, the chairman of the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence since its founding seven years ago.

Boland's main argument, which he stated in presenting his cutoff bill, was that "This secret war is bad U.S. policy—because it does not work; because it is in fact counterproductive to U.S. interests; because it is illegal." The ensuing floor debate, which was rated by Capitol Hill reporters as one of the best in a long time, revolved mostly around these issues, pro or con.

In the background, though, was the personal credibility of Boland and the institutional credibility of the Intelligence Committee, whose Democratic members strongly backed their chairman in calling for an end to the undercover U.S. aid.

Boland, 71, has been in the House for 30 years without making waves or headlines. He is so controversial at home that a few years ago he spent a total of $47 on his reelection campaign, a record low for any House member that year, and such a publicity seeker that he does not even place his biography in the Congressional Directory, rarely issues a press release or grants an interview and recently turned away many offers to be interviewed on national television programs about his stand on Central America.

Within the House Boland is considered a serious and powerful figure, but to the public, at least until recently, his profile was so low that by his own admission, "If you ask anyplace else but Springfield, Mass., nobody would even know me."

Before the controversy about the Nicaraguan "contras" Boland was perhaps best known among capital insiders as the close friend and, for 24 years, the Washington roommate of Rep. Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill Jr. (D-Mass.). During most of that time O'Neill commuted home to Cambridge every weekend and Boland was a bachelor. He married late, 10 years ago, and now flies home to his wife and four young children on weekends.

After being elected speaker of the House in January, 1977, O'Neill was briefed by the CIA top brass every Wednesday morning in Sam Rayburn's secluded "Board of Education" drinking room in the Capitol.

After a few months of hearing secrets he could not tell anyone else, O'Neill decided to turn over the job to a committee of trusted people, lest one of his sleepy solo sessions at 7 a.m. be the basis for an executive branch claim that by consulting him the House had been consulted about some questionable or ill-fated operation in the twilight zone between war and peace.

Set up as a select committee, the intelligence panel's membership is under the personal control of the speaker rather than being subject to party vote. O'Neill used that control to install a group of respected, serious and uncontroversial people.

For the chairmanship O'Neill picked his old friend and roommate, of whom he recently said, "Eddie is so secretive he wouldn't even tell his left hand what his right hand is doing."

Boland, in turn, decided to share the secrets and the responsibility with his fellows and rule by consensus, in all but the rarest of cases bipartisan consensus.

Partly because they share secrets they can't talk about, the intelligence committee has become something of a special club in the House, with most members spending much time in their clubhouse, the tightly guarded Capitol office of the committee, reading classified reports and hearing briefings from officials of the CIA and other intelligence agencies.

Under the post-Watergate Hughes-Ryan law, all secret U.S. intelligence operations must be authorized in writing by the president and presented in timely fashion to the intelligence committees of the House and Senate.

In this way the committees have been informed of dozens of such operations, large and small. In most cases, they have gone along. At other times, although they possess no veto power under law, their doubts or criticisms expressed by letter to the CIA have been enough to cause the questioned operation to be dropped.

Right from the start, Boland and his colleagues were leery of the "secret war" in Nicaragua, and right from the start, the Reagan administration seemed determined to proceed no matter what.

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